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Decision on SALT-related missile is delayed once again

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Washington—The administration again is delaying its decision on a new missile that is closely related to the coming SALT treaty debate, telling restive senators they will have to wait at least until the end of this month.

The Senate Armed Services Committee, facing deadlines in its work on this year's defense money bill and annoyed about indecision on the so-called MX missile, had requested that Harold Brown, Secretary of Defense, report by last Wednesday on his preference for deploying the weapon.

Under the strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union, each side is allowed one new type of intercontinental missile, and the MX or some variant is the apparent United States choice.

But the Carter administration has, it is fair to say, backed and filled on what to do about the missile, specifically on whether to base it in holes in the ground, aboard new-type airplanes or in some combination. There have been both accelerations and slowdowns in the program as debate proceeded on what basic system to employ.

Now additional alternatives have entered the picture, including possible basing of the MX or a version of the Navy's Trident 2 rocket in fixed underground silos—in spite of the official acknowledgment that Russian missiles will be able to knock out such targets in the 1980's.

There is a consensus in the Defense Department, however, that the new-type missile must be mobile—kept moving at random among underground holes and/or in airplanes so that it is too hard to target and thus preserves the U.S. nuclear deterrent.

Because decisions still have not been made, Mr. Brown is preparing a letter to Senator John C. Stennis (D., Miss.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee, saying, according to the Pentagon's spokesman, that he hopes "to have more definitive answers" by the end of the month.

Thomas B. Ross, the spokesman, said Mr. Brown will be discussing the missile options with President Carter soon. A "good interpretation" of the letter to Mr. Stennis, Mr. Ross indicated, is that a presidential decision may be reached by the end of May.

Some SALT critics have been skeptical that Mr. Carter would give a final go-ahead to the MX-missile system, citing his killing of the B-1 bomber and wavering on a neutron warhead for deployment in Europe.

Defense authorities contend the MX, or variant thereof, is a wholly different matter, having to do with strategic nuclear parity, which the SALT treaty envisions as a principle of superpower relations and which the administration has vowed to maintain.

Without a mobile missile, credibly secure against knockout attacks, defense authorities argue that the principle of parity would be brought into question.

Though the Russians have raised questions about whether an MX missile is permissible under treaty terms, administration officials assert that it unquestionably is. The issue is whether the holes it would be moved among are actual launchers, because new underground silos are barred. The Washington contention is that the canisters carrying the mobile missiles—not the new holes in the ground—are the launchers.

Writing definitions of new missiles—to prevent either side from developing more than one—was one of the toughest aspects of the SALT negotiations. Closely related was the matter of each side's being able to verify with its own devices whether such treaty terms were being honored.

Apart from the one new type allowed, it was agreed that any assisting missile whose characteristics—length, diameter, launch weight, throw weight or payload—were changed by more than plus or minus 5 per cent would be a new weapon and thus banned.

Monitoring missile tests to check compliance requires interception of data radioed back from the test vehicle. The treaty says there will be no deliberate denial (meaning encoding) of such telemetry when such action would impede verification.